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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000101

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TAGS: [ES](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONAL CIVILIAN POLICE DIRECTOR RESIGNS TO RUN
FOR PRESIDENT

REF: 2007 SAN SALVADOR 1485

Classified By: Charge Michael Butler for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Rodrigo Avila, the highly-respected Director of the National Civilian Police (PNC), on January 25 announced his resignation from the PNC and his subsequent intention to seek the ARENA party Presidential nomination in the March 2009 elections. While Avila's decision to throw his hat into the Presidential mix seemingly offers ARENA a strong leader to rally behind in the looming electoral confrontation with Mauricio Funes and the FMLN, it remains to be seen whether Avila will be able to overcome a few key hurdles that could prevent him from mounting a serious bid for the ARENA nomination. End summary.

¶2. (C) Avila is a young technocrat best known for having served two stints as Director of the National Civilian Police, the first time under then President Armando Calderon Sol (1994-99), and the second under current President Elias Antonio Saca (Jan. 2006-Jan. 2008). As PNC Director, Avila has shown strong leadership skills, as well as a determination to enhance the professionalism and institutional capacity of the national police force. He was instrumental in the creation of the Special Operations Group, a PNC unit tasked with locating, tracking, and apprehending the most dangerous Salvadoran criminals, as well as the Transnational Anti-Gang Unit (TAG), a joint PNC-FBI entity charged with leading the offensive against MS-13 and M-18. Avila, who was educated in the U.S. (Gainesville, GA, and NC State) and speaks fluent English with a hint of a southern drawl, has consistently sought to expand cooperative law enforcement efforts with the U.S., as well as to make the most of USG-provided law enforcement assistance. Over the course of his seven years at the helm of the PNC, Avila has exercised responsible stewardship of an important national organization. At the conclusion of both of his tenures in office he left the police force in better condition than when he started. Given the immensity of the criminal threat facing the undermanned, understaffed PNC, however, Avila's laudable efforts have not been sufficient to allow the Salvadoran government to make significant progress in terms of reducing violent crime rates.

¶3. (C) While Avila's management of the PNC has been focused primarily on operational law enforcement issues, he has also demonstrated a propensity to use the position to generate political momentum for the two ARENA presidents he has served. In response to public concern over spiraling rates of kidnappings, extortion, and gang activity, Avila has mounted concentrated law enforcement campaigns aimed at addressing the problems at hand. Not coincidentally, he has also ensured that PNC efforts have received extensive media coverage and been manifestly linked to Presidential assurances of enhanced public security. In the process, Avila has solidified a leadership position within the ARENA party, and developed a reputation as a leading authority on

public security issues.

14. (C) Despite Avila's strong track record with the PNC, a few significant obstacles could still derail his bid to secure the ARENA Presidential nomination for 2009. FMLN strategists tasked with countering an Avila candidacy will almost certainly generate statistics purporting to show that violent crime and rates of victimization increased during Avila's two stints at the PNC. They will also attempt to portray Avila as a key enabler in the 'politicization' of Salvadoran law enforcement under President Saca, identifying the PNC response to the July 2007 riots in Suchitoto (reftel) as a prime point of reference in an alleged pattern of backsliding on human rights under President Saca.

15. (C) On an even more basic level, unsubstantiated but lingering accusations of conflict of interest could undermine Avila's candidacy within ARENA itself. Press speculation, as well as persistent rumors on the political cocktail circuit, allege that after assuming the directorship of the PNC for a second time in January 2006 Avila never fully divested his financial interests in various business ventures involving security services and the sale of firearms. (Note: Our information indicates that he divested these interests while in the Legislative Assembly. End note). How these allegations will play out in the ARENA selection process, let alone how Avila will stack up against the other announced ARENA candidates in the internal party deliberations remains to be seen.

16. (C) Should Avila secure the ARENA nomination, he would seem to match up well against the FMLN's Mauricio Funes. Avila is young (born June 25, 1964), well-spoken, telegenic, and would appear able to connect with a wide spectrum of Salvadoran voters. His track record on public security

issues, as well as his previous service as Vice Minister of Governance (2004-2005) and member of the Legislative Assembly (2000-2003) would also appear to offer advantages over the relative inexperience of former journalist turned politico Mauricio Funes. Avila's proving able to put a positive spin on his stewardship of the PNC would enable him to both win over and reassure a Salvadoran public anxious over violent crime. Avila can also point to an excellent relationship with the embassy and USG in general, as well as an extensive network of contacts in the U.S. In contrast, his most recent foray into electoral politics, a failed run for the mayorship of Santa Tecla against popular FMLN politico Oscar Ortiz, did not go terribly well. Additional years of experience at the PNC, coupled with enthusiastic backing from the ARENA rank and file, could conceivably push Avila over the top should he reach the larger stage a Presidential bid would afford.

17. (C) Comment: Avila is both well-known and well-regarded within this mission. As Director of the PNC, he has demonstrated a strong propensity to work in support of U.S. interests, as well as a strongly pro-American demeanor. Simply put, this is definitely someone we can work with. Should Avila's candidacy gain traction within ARENA, we would strongly suggest efforts to put him in touch with Department officials and other Washington principals as events warrant. End comment.
BUTLER